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ABSTRACT

Conflict and stress often come hand-in-hand; the management of one influences the management of the other. While training programs dealing with conflict management and stress reduction vary in length of time, depth of instruction, and specific focus, there are ultimately three important facets inherent to the topic. The first facet encompasses analyzing the characteristics of the actual problem being faced. Identifying the actual sources of the perceived conflict, the nature of the conflict, and the stress associated with it is critical. The second facet involves learning how to utilize conflict resolution strategies. Emphasis is placed on rhetorical purpose and communication focus. The third facet involves managing individual responses to conflict and stress. Clarifying personal values, developing specific coping strategies, and utilizing general stress management techniques are important factors. Conflict and stress management training programs need to enhance the learning of appropriate communication skills and knowing when and how to apply them. Training that integrates the three facets associated with conflict and stress offers a solid foundation to provide the insights needed to reach good decisions and the communication skills for executing them. (Twenty references are attached.) (PRA)

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"Anger, Hostility, and Aggression: Individual Focus and Control"

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Abstract

Conflict and stress often come hand-in-hand; the management of one influences the management of the other. While training programs dealing with conflict management and stress reduction vary in length of time, depth of instruction, and specific focus, there are ultimately three important facets inherent to the topic. The first facet encompasses analyzing the characteristics of the actual problem being faced. The second facet involves learning how to utilize conflict resolution strategies. The third facet involves managing individual responses to conflict and stress.

This paper discusses techniques for helping people deal with conflict and stress on an individual basis. The primary goal of the paper is to offer suggestions for focus, describe effective training techniques, and provide references for various content development.

Training sessions dealing with conflict management and/or stress reduction vary extensively. The specific participant needs and the training context determine, to a large extent, the content and format to be followed. The primary goal of this paper is to offer suggestions for focus, describe effective training techniques, and provide references for various content development.

This paper discusses techniques for helping people deal with conflict and stress on an individual basis. The emphasis is on individual or internal control. The topics are laid out step-by-step to develop personal strategies for dealing with conflict and stress. The material builds from a general understanding of the issues and constraints to establishing a repertoire of specific behaviors and attitudes. The first step involves identifying the exact nature of the problem. The second step involves learning general conflict resolution strategies. The third, and final, step involves setting up a personal response strategy.

Identifying the Problem

If you were to ask your participants to tell you why they came to a conflict management workshop, their typical response may be something like, "my boss is a real _ _ _ hole," or "if one more irate customer jumps up in my face, I'll scream," or perhaps even "we have to fight for every little thing we get in our office . . . paper clips, file holders, let alone another computer!" The reasons vary from simple to extreme . . . from mild to explosive. The perspective is usually the same--the effect the conflict has on their personal lives. Many may not recognize the complexity of their situations.

A great deal can be accomplished by helping people see their lives from a new, or broader, perspective. Positive change may be accomplished simply by seeing things differently. Some individuals may be able to supply answers and discover appropriate actions to take to ease conflict and reduce stress when they have adopted a new perspective.

The trainer should strive to help participants develop three facets of understanding at this point: 1) an understanding of, and insights into, the relationship between perception and communication; 2) ways in which to identify actual sources of conflict; and 3) ways in which to monitor individual stress levels.

Most people who teach communication skills readily agree that individual perceptions play a critical role in the communication process. A unit or session on perception provides

for critical skill building for communication in general, and conflict management in particular. The session should be designed to increase the participants' awareness of their role as communicator. The session lends itself well to fun activities and entertaining interaction. This will allow participants to get to know one another a little better and helps to build unity for the group. A stronger understanding of the process of communication and the role of perception affords a strong transition into examining the context of conflict.

The second facet of understanding conflict situations involves determining the exact nature of the problem that the participant may face. This unit or session should examine the different types of conflict and the various sources for these conflicts. Discussion should cover a basic definition of conflict (Thomas, 1976), the stages that conflict goes through (Robinson,1978), the types of conflict that may be encountered (Raven and Kruglanski, 1970, Schmidt and Kochan, 1972), and the methods used for handling conflict (Jamieson and Thomas, 1974). It is important to impress upon the participants the importance of monitoring their communication when in conflict situations. Specific attention should be paid in helping them identify how they talk to others and to determine the expressed goal of the communication they are involved in (Robbins, 1978).

The third facet of understanding conflict situations involves monitoring personal stress levels. Irritability, depression, or being "stressed out" increases the likelihood of

defensive communication. The likelihood of moving into a conflict situation that may otherwise have been avoided also increases. Having a clearer understanding of your own stress tolerance is a helpful tool in coping with stress and its counter-productive outcomes.

Not all stress is bad; in fact, some stress is essential to living a full, productive life (Selye, 1974). Given the high-stress atmosphere of today's work environment, measuring stress levels may be critical to daily performance. A self-scoring stress test can help identify problem areas. Most stress tests focus on "hot spots" such as: employee/administrator relations, employee/employee relations, employee/customer relations, time management, intrapersonal conflicts, physical symptoms of stress, psychological/emotional symptoms of stress, and stress management techniques.

Any number of different stress tests have been developed according to occupation. The more direct the applications the better. Written, self-scoring stress tests are usually available through a company's Human Resource or Personnel departments, or company psychologist. (An example may be the Wilson Stress Profile for Teachers, Truch 1980, pp. 103-106).

Data from the stress test combined with daily observations can help delineate personal stress patterns. This type of monitoring allows individuals to more easily identify when a "cooling off period" is needed, how to reschedule various activities to better regulate stress, and to know when to avoid

certain people or situations.

Gaining insights into various constraints associated with conflict as well as into personal responses to stress and conflict is only a small part of the process. Having accomplished this first step, participants have a fairly good foundation for moving on to learning specific conflict resolution strategies.

Conflict Resolution Strategies

There are any number of specific strategies identified in the literature for responding to conflict. Thomas's work (1977) is perhaps one of the best known and most often used reference on techniques for conflict resolution. Several other important sources for conflict resolution strategies include: Sillars, (1980), Walton (1969), Marwell and Schmidt (1967), Lukes (1974), Bacharach and Baratz (1962), Baratz (1970), and Raven and Kruglanski (1970).

The strategies for positive conflict resolution are essentially based on two premises: 1) the parties involved in the conflict are willing to attempt to resolve it, and 2) the parties involved will behave rationally, be trustworthy, and not be abusive to one another. What happens when this is not the case? When you must bare the brunt of other peoples' behavior? When you find yourself asking, "Why am I always the one who has to 'deal' with the situation?" or feeling as though you're "tired of having to do all of the work to keep things running smoothly around here!"

Understanding and utilizing specific conflict resolution strategies is mitigated by context and personal choice. While many of the factors associated with conflict may be beyond your control to a large extent, your personal response to the situation is dictated solely by your choice.

Personal Response to Conflict and Stress

In conflict situations, the natural response for individuals is to defend themselves or their positions. Defense is an instinctive response to a perceived threat, whether it be physical, territorial, or psychological. Responses to perceived threat are either destructive or constructive. The first step in developing a personal strategy for responding to conflict and stress involves understanding the nature of defensive communication.

Gary Cross (1978) provides a clear, succinct description of the types of defensive communication and how they function in his article, "How to Overcome Defensive Communications." He points out that " . . . simply recognizing that defensive communication is debilitating to interpersonal relationships, and that it exists to some degree in all organizations, is not enough" (page, 441). Cross (1978) emphasizes that individuals need to know how to apply effective antidotes to defensive communication so often associated with conflict. He offers specific suggestions on how to avoid sending defensive communication and how to respond to defensive communication:

<u>How to Avoid Sending Defensive Communication</u>

1. Deal with the problem, not the person.
2. Appeal to a common goal, don't exercise control.
3. Respond to people, don't react.
4. Deal with behavioral effects, don't be judgmental.

How to Respond to Defensive Communication

1. Paraphrasing.
2. Perception Checking.
3. Asking for Clarification.

In her book, The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense, Suzette Haden Elgin (1980) offers insights into the nature of verbal attacks and responses. She focuses on skills and strategies for managing defensive interactions. The book provides information about assertive communication, communication patterns, various modes of interaction, vocal cues, and body language. The text and references provide a wide range of research and other materials that may be used in tailoring workshop materials.

The primary thrust of information sharing and exercises in this area is to help participants build an extensive repertoire of rhetorical skills for responding to conflict. The larger (or stronger) their repertoire, the better able they are to make effective choices about how to respond to different situations.

Focusing on effective responses and controlling and directing non-defensive communication is hard work. It is much easier, and often more emotionally satisfying, to vent frustrations or hostilities on the other party involved. Gauging how much the effort is worth can make the difference between

constructive or destructive interactions. Knowing how to communicate effectively and non-defensively is only as good as the willingness to actually do so.

The next step is designed to help participants realize the depth and significance of the choices open to them. There is extensive research documenting the fact that defensive communication is debilitating to interpersonal relationships and that it hurts the morale, efficiency, innovativeness and trust of an organization's members. The focus here should help participants gauge the significance of their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors.

Almost everyone is faced at one time or another with a struggle in integrating their own personal goals, professional goals, and/or life goals with the various goals and objectives inherent in the role or activity in which they are involved. This struggle is often associated with difficulty in prioratizing objectives. A brief component on values clarification may help individuals in responding to conflict situations. It may also help to fortify their resolve to deal positively with conflict situations and strengthen their commitment to the choices they make.

The session on values clarification should be designed to foster individual insights as well as enhance a broad perspective on the overall impact of different types of responses. The materials should be developed so that the participants will walk away with tools that will allow them to make future decisions

based on a pro/con, long term/short term, best case/worst case scenario. There are a variety of resources available for training in values clarification and ethics (Wallace, 1955 for example). Cavanagh, Mobert, and Valesquez (1981) have also developed a decision tree for incorporating ethics into political behavior decisions which may be useful for this type of training session.

High levels of conflict and stress are inherent in certain professions. Emergency service personnel, social services (including ministry and teaching), and certainly working on the stock exchange easily fall into this category. High levels of conflict and stress are also associated with specific positions within organizations, such as secretaries, receptionists, and others faced with multiple roles, high responsibility and little authority. People on the professional "front lines," sometimes find themselves searching for ways to help them bring order to chaos, or have control where there is ambiguity.

Developing effective communication skills is a critical factor in increasing personal control and focus. These skills need to be incorporated, however, with a repertoire of personal coping strategies to meet the demands associated with dealing regularly with high conflict/high stress situations. Where conflict and stress take on a snow-ball effect, the result is what is commonly referred to as "burnout." Maslach & Jackson (1981) define burnout as a physiological and psychological state characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and

lack of on-the-job accomplishment.

Coping with stress, like experiencing it, is highly individual. Identifying the sources of conflict and stress is the first step. Learning effective communication responses to conflict can be reinforced by learning how to effectively respond to stress. Martinez (1989) identifies six general guidelines for coping positively with stress:

1. Find some "wiggle room." Focus on what can be done rather than what can't. Individuals may feel handicapped by external constraints--regulations, working conditions, limitation on resources and time. Arthur Combs suggests, "[t]here is always room to wiggle. There is always at least a little room to experiment, to try to change things," (quoted in Frymier, 1987, p. 12). If you do not have the resources or authorization to implement an ideal solution or completely address a situation, exercise what is within your control.

2. Cycle intensity. Plan your work schedule so that you can balance periods of intense work or high pressure with less demanding activities. This type of planning, or cycling, allows regeneration and/or recovery periods rather than a never ending up-hill battle.

3. Balance high-stress with low-stress activities. The old adage about not bringing your office problems home with you reflects the need for balance between stress and relaxation. High-stress should be consistently matched with low-stress or relaxation. The idea is to regularly insure for balance rather

than to collapse. Enforced rest can, in and of itself, be a source of high-stress!

4. Learn to relax under stress as well as during rest times. It is important to develop methods of physically and emotionally relaxing while under stress. Whether it involves ten quiet minutes in your office with the door closed practicing Transcendental Meditation or talking to your plants, it is important to be able to take a brief "time out" when under high-stress. Relaxing, even briefly, will help you slow down the emotional reactions and, when you return to the problem, begin thinking rationally about a solution.

5. Change distress to eustress. According to Hans Selye (1974), "it is not stress but our reaction to stress that creates problems physically and psychologically. A negative reaction results in distress--a physical and psychological state tied to high blood pressure, ulcers, backaches, and headaches. A positive reaction results in eustress--a motivating force that heightens energy levels and increases productivity" (p.280).

6. Exercise regularly. Generally, the person who exercises regularly is better able to meet the demands stress places on the body and also better able to maintain emotional as well as physical equilibrium in stressful situations.

In addition to developing specific response strategies, Holt, Fine, and Tollefson (1987) indicate that is important to cultivate what they refer to as "stress hardiness." They mention three overall factors that seem to contribute to stress

hardiness: 1) commitment - "the tendency to be involved in (rather than alienated from) many aspects of one's life"; 2) challenge - "The belief that change, rather than stability, is characteristic of life"; and 3) control - believing and acting "as if one is influential (rather than helpless) in the course of events in one's life" (pp. 51- 52). They emphasize that "[i]f you are involved and committed, you are more likely to find meaning and value in who you are and what you do, despite the stress involved in your job" (p. 56).

The final step in developing a personal response strategy for dealing with conflict and stress involves establishing support systems. Support systems need to consist of several different segments: social contacts, close colleagues and mentors, and specialized training programs. The support system provides a safe avenue for venting frustrations and hostilities. Colleagues and mentors are especially helpful for sharing common concerns, relating various experiences, benefitting from each others' trials and errors, gaining insights into various strategies and applications that have been used successfully by others in the past. Support systems may also lead to low-stress activities and recreation that affords stress balance.

The training session for this component is most beneficial when participants are not only led to recognize the importance of support systems, but are given some insights into how to build support systems for themselves. Activities may range from simply generating "who do you know" lists to more sophisticated analyses

of networking and coalition building. Some helpful references for the latter may include: Baker's (1981) work "Social Coalitions"; French and Raven's (1959), "The Bases of Social Power"; Goodstein's (1981) "Getting your way: A training activity in understanding power and influence"; Pfeffer & Salancik's (1977) "Organizational design: The case for a coalitional model of organizations"; and Schwartz & Jacobson's (1977) "Organizational communication network analysis: The liaison communication role." A description of other training programs that workshop participants could benefit from is also helpful.

Conclusion

Conflict and stress often come hand-in-hand; the management of one influences the management of the other. While training programs dealing with conflict management and stress reduction vary in length of time, depth of instruction, and specific focus, there are ultimately three important facets inherent to the topic. The first facet encompasses analyzing the characteristics of the actual problem being faced. Identifying the actual sources of the perceived conflict, the nature of that conflict, and the stress associated with it is critical. The second facet involves learning how to utilize conflict resolution strategies. Emphasis is placed on rhetorical purpose and communication focus. The third, and final, facet involves managing individual responses to conflict and stress. Clarifying personal values, developing specific coping strategies, and utilizing general stress management techniques are important factors.

Most people readily agree that informed choices mean better choices. Conflict and stress management training programs need to enhance the learning of appropriate communication skills and knowing when and how to apply them. The individual ultimately decides what is at stake, the importance of the outcomes, and the weight of the risks involved. The clearer the understanding of these factors, the better. Training that integrates the three

facets associated with conflict and stress offers a solid foundation to provide the insights needed to reach good decisions and the communication skills for executing them.

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